

'A Call to Action for Affirmative Action'

Rep. John Conyers Jr.

The most important social issue we face in this new century is how highly diverse people can co-exist and prosper together. Each year, America is becoming increasingly diverse, racially and ethnically. By the year 2030, it is estimated that forty percent of all Americans will be members of minority groups.

But, what is disturbing to me is that despite our increasingly diverse society, data shows that Americans of different racial and ethnic groups live largely separate lives. They live in separate neighborhoods, reside in separate communities, worship separately and attend separate elementary and secondary schools. In fact, Americans establish very few meaningful relationships across racial and ethnic lines.

Studies indicate, however, that being a part of a diverse student body in higher education can significantly affect the extent to which graduates move on to live racially and ethnically integrated lives — in effect, students educated in diverse settings are better equipped to thrive in a diverse society.

Furthermore, as Justice Lewis Powell recognized in the 1978 Bakke decision, diversity gives all students the advantage of new perspectives in the classroom. In Bakke, the U.S. Supreme Court held that seeking diversity in education admissions was

not only constitutional, but served a compelling state interest. For more than two decades, that has been the law of the land.

But despite the established societal merits of diversity in higher education, and despite the Supreme Court's decision in Bakke upholding the principle of diversity in education, affirmative action programs at our

similar public policy in California implemented through referenda has already resulted in stark segregation there.

These decisions are out of touch with social reality. The notion that the compelling social need for a diverse student body should be jettisoned in the name of equal protection — in

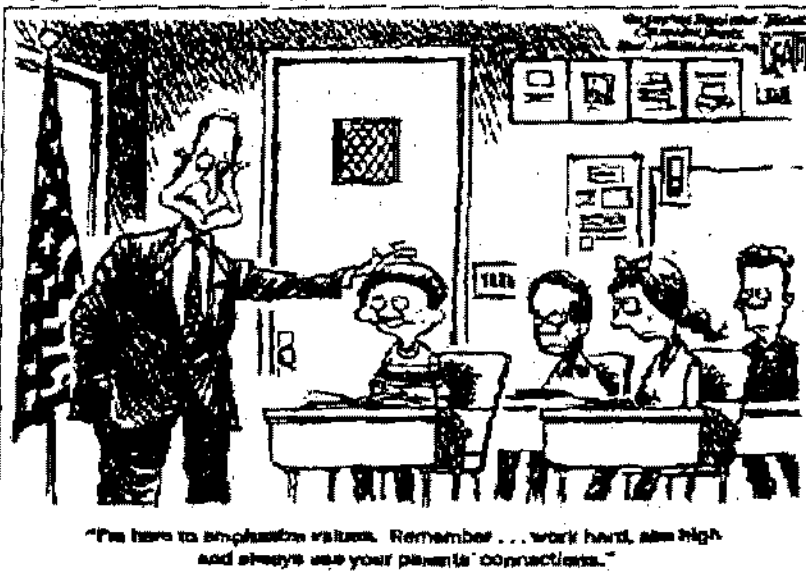
a social context where discrimination exists on many planes, where funding for public schools is disparate, and where a complex interplay of social and historical conditions often perpetuate segregation — ignores reality.

Reality is that one of the principal reasons our nation has enjoyed unprecedented economic growth is because of our openness to new people and ideas. Reality is that our

diversity is our strength, not our weakness.

In 1954, the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* opened up educational opportunities for millions of minorities. The recent affirmative action decisions of the federal judiciary, however, are placing these opportunities for which we fought so hard in serious jeopardy.

This latest assault on affirmative action in Michigan is a call to action. The Congressional Black Caucus, Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Civil Rights Community and every community must meet the challenge — the rich diversity of America depends on it.



nation's colleges and universities are under assault. State by state, critics of affirmative action are chipping away at the strides we have made over the last thirty years to provide higher education to all Americans.

For example, just last month, a U.S. district court judge struck down the affirmative action policy at the University of Michigan Law School, holding that seeking diversity in education admissions did not serve a compelling interest — a blatant rejection of the Supreme Court's holding in Bakke. In 1996, the Fifth Circuit struck down the affirmative action policy at the University of Texas Law School on the same grounds. And